

How Children are Valued in the Jewish Tradition

Rabbi David Rosen

Judaism views childhood as a period of purity, joy, and beauty to be valued and cherished. The Talmud states that “childhood is a garland of roses” and that “the very breath of children is free of sin.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 152, 119).

As Judaism recognizes that a child does not have the cognitive ability to fully distinguish good from evil, the parent has the ultimate responsibility of guiding the child in keeping with the words in Deut. 11 v.18 “And you shall teach them (the words of God) to your children ... in order that you may lengthen your days and your children’s days upon the earth.” Similarly Proverbs 1.v.8 enjoins “Listen my child to the instruction of your father, and forsake not the teachings of your mother.”

Children are regarded as the hope of the future in every society, yet among the Jewish people this concept is enhanced by the view that children are a Divine trust and guarantors of the future. The Book of Psalms (127 v.3) declares “children are an inheritance from the Lord”, and in the ancient homiletical tradition, we read that Rabbi Meir said: “When the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai to receive Divine Revelation, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: ‘Bring me good guarantors that you will keep my Revelation and then I will give it to you.’ They replied: ‘Sovereign of the Universe, our ancestors will be our guarantors.’ Said God them: ‘Your guarantors need guarantors themselves, for they have not been without fault.’ They answered, ‘Our prophets will be our guarantors.’ God replied: ‘They have also not been without fault.’ Then the Israelites said: ‘Our children will be our guarantors.’ To which God replied: ‘In truth these are good guarantors. For their sake I will give it to you.’” (Canticles Rabbah, 1:4)

Since Judaism teaches that all human beings are created in the Image of God, human life is therefore sacrosanct and the Talmud (Shabbat 15b) rules accordingly that: “one desecrates the Sabbath for the sake of a babe of one day, but not for the dead body even of David, King of Israel.” Thus, the sacredness of human life is applied to the infant as soon as she or he is born. The need to enable every child to recognize his or her own dignity and value is expressed in the teaching that “every individual should perceive the world as having been created for his/her own sake.” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38). As a logical consequence of this conception, each child is entitled to be loved and cared for in order that he or she may have the possibility of developing to his maximum capability.

Jewish law specifies the rights of children which are the primary obligation of the natural parents, but which in the latter’s absence, incapacity or failure, become the responsibility of the community. These include not only the right to life, dignity and freedom; but also to be provided with the skills to survive natural dangers as well as to earn a living and be self sustaining. They also include the right to establish an independent marital home upon reaching maturity (which requires the provision of a dowry for a girl) as well as property rights (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin, 30; Code of Jewish Law, Choshen Mishpat, 149).

While the most basic needs that parents and community must provide for children are those of food, clothing and protection (Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 49; Maimonides, Yad, Hilchot Ishut, 12) education has a special place of importance (Mishnah, Chagigah 1:2; Babylonian Talmud Sukkah, 42 & Shabbat, 121) as providing the values by which children learn to live a holy, spiritual and moral life, and subsequently pass on the Heritage to future generations.

Even in this context let alone generally, the abuse of children is prohibited even to parents and teachers with good intentions. This especially applies to orphans for whom the community bears responsibility for their needs (Babylonian Talmud Ketubot, 50); Maimonides (Hilchot Deot, 6 : 10) declares “A person must be especially heedful of his behavior toward widows and orphans, for their souls are exceedingly depressed and their spirits low. Even if they are wealthy, even if they are the widow and orphans of a king, we are especially enjoined concerning them, as it is written: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.”(Exodus 22 v.21)

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How are we to conduct ourselves toward them? One may not speak to them other than in a tender manner. One must show them courtesy; one must not hurt them physically with hard toil, nor wound their feelings with hard speech. One must take greater care of their property than of one's own. Whoever irritates them, provokes them to anger, pains them, persecutes them, or causes them loss of money, is guilty of serious transgression, and all the more so if one beats them. He who created the world by His word made a covenant with widows and orphans that when they cry out because of violence they are answered; as it is written: "Beware of afflicting them in any way, for if they cry at all unto Me I will surely hear their cry!"(Exodus 22 v.22)

This importance of care for orphans in Judaism is beautifully expressed in the ancient rabbinic homily (Exodus Rabbah 45) that describes the Almighty showing Moses all the treasures prepared in Heaven for the righteous and telling him that the most valuable treasure is reserved for those who bring up orphans.

In addition to the intrinsic value of the child and our responsibilities accordingly, Judaism recognizes that the wellbeing of society as a whole is determined by our treatment of children. Moreover just as we were beneficiaries of such consideration, we are obliged to demonstrate such for future generations. In this regard, Rabbi Yochanan relates in the Talmud the story of a man who planted a carob tree, which is known to bear fruit only after seventy years. When asked whether he thought he would live to eat from the tree, the man replied: "I am doing as my ancestors did. Just as they planted a carob tree for their children, I am planning for my children." (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit, 23).